

Through the Bible Book by Book

Old Testament

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Esther

Theme: The book of Esther has a peculiarity that distinguishes it from any other book in the Bible: namely, the name of GOD is not once mentioned, neither are there any references to Jewish law or religion. But if GOD's name is not mentioned, there are abundant evidences of His working and of His care for His people. The book records GOD's deliverance of His people from a threatened destruction.

As truly as He saved His people from Pharaoh's power, He delivered Israel from the hands of the wicked Haman. In the former case, the deliverance was effected by a manifestation of His power and a revelation of Himself; but in the latter case, He remained unseen to His people and enemies, effecting salvation through human channels, and by natural means. The very absence of the name of GOD is its chief beauty and should not be considered as a blot upon it. Matthew Henry says, "If the name of GOD is not here, His finger is." This book is, as Dr. Pierson called it, "*The Romance of Providence.*"

"By Providence we mean that in all the affairs and events of human life, individual and national, GOD has a part and share. But that control is a secret and hidden one. Hence in this wonderful story which teaches the reality of the Divine providence, the name of GOD does not appear, only as the eye of faith sees the Divine factor in human history; but to the attentive observer all history is a Burning Bush aflame with the mysterious presence. Jewish tradition gives Deuteronomy 31:18 as another reason why GOD's name is not mentioned. Because of their sin. GOD had hidden His face from Israel. Yet, though hiding His face, He was not forgetful or unconcerned about His people, though He did it under a veil." - Lee.

The message of the book may be summed up as follows: The Reality of Divine Providence.

Author: Unknown. Possibly Mordecai (See 9:20). Some believe Ezra wrote it.

Scope: Between the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra, before Ezra left for Jerusalem.

CONTENTS

Following the suggestion of Robert Lee of the Mildmay Bible School, we center the contents of the book around the three feasts mentioned therein.

- I. The Feast of Ahasuerus (1, 2).
- II. The Feast of Esther (3-7).
- III. The Feast of Purim (8-10).

I. The Feast of Ahasuerus

- 1. Vashti's disobedience (Chapter 1).
- 2. Esther's coronation (2:1-20).
- 3. Mordecai saves the king's life (2:21-23).

"The refusal of Vashti to obey an order that required her to make an indecent exposure of herself before a company of drunken revelers, was becoming with the modesty of her sex and her rank as queen, for according to Persian customs, the queen, even more than the wives of other men, was excluded from the public gaze; and had not the king's blood been heated with wine, or his reason overpowered by the force of offended pride, he would have perceived that his own honor, as well as hers, was consulted by her dignified conduct. The wise men whom the king consulted were probably the magi, without whose advice as to the proper time of doing a thing the Persian kings never did take any step whatever; and the persons named were the 'seven counselors' who formed the state ministry.

The combined wisdom of all, it seems, was enlisted to consult with the king what course should be taken after so unprecedented an occurrence as Vashti's disobedience for the royal summons. It is scarcely possible for us to imagine the astonishment produced by such a refusal in a country where the will of the sovereign was absolute. The assembled grandees were petrified with horror at the daring affront; alarm for the consequences that might ensue to each of them in his own household next seized on their minds, and the sounds of bacchanalian revelry were hushed into deep and anxious consultation as to what punishment to inflict on the refractory queen."

- Jamieson, Fausset and Brown.

Notice what is said in verse 19 concerning the laws of the Medes and Persians. The Persians seem to have affected such a degree of wisdom in the construction of their laws, that they never could be amended or repealed; and this formed the ground of the saying "**The laws of the Medes and Persians that change not.**"

Ahasuerus was probably sorry for his treatment of Vashti (2:1), but according to the law which made the word of a Persian king irrevocable, she could not be recalled by law.

Chapter 2:3, 4 refers to a harsh custom of the East. When the order came forth from the royal court for a girl to present herself before the king, however unwilling the parents were, they dared not refuse. Thus Esther was compelled to enter the court of Ahasuerus. It should be noted that, in the East, where polygamy prevailed, it was considered no disgrace for a girl to belong to the "Harem" of a ruler. Everyone there was considered a wife of the king.

Notice that Mordecai had instructed Esther to conceal her nationality (2:10). If Esther had made this known, it would have interfered with her advancement to the rank of queen, as the Jews were generally despised. In this injunction of Mordecai to Esther, we see an indication of Divine leading, for was it not by her being queen that Esther was able to save her people?

chapter 2:21 mentions another link in the chain of GOD's providence. Mordecai protects the life of the king against plotters, and this is recorded in the chronicles of the kingdom. This incident played an important part in the deliverance of the Jews, as we shall see later.

II. The Feast of Esther

1. Haman's plot (Chapter 3).
2. The Jews' mourning (Chapter 4).
3. Esther's petition (Chapter 5).
4. Mordecai's exaltation (Chapter 6).
5. Haman's death (Chapter 7).

The quotations given in the following section are taken from Jamieson, Fausset and Brown's commentary.

"The obsequious homage of prostration, not entirely foreign to the manners of the East, had not been claimed by former viziers; but Haman required that all subordinate officers of the court should bow before him with their faces to the earth. But to Mordecai it seemed that such an attitude of profound reverence was due only to GOD."

"Haman, being an Amalekite, one of a doomed and accursed race, was doubtless another element in the refusal; and on hearing that the offender was a Jew, whose non-conformity was grounded on religious scruples, the magnitude of the affront appeared so much the greater, as the example of Mordecai would be imitated by his countrymen. Had the homage been a simple token of civil respect, Mordecai would not have refused it; but the Persian kings demanded a sort of adoration which even the Greeks reckoned it degradation to express, and which, to Mordecai would have been a violation of the second commandment."

Haman was so incensed at Mordecai's refusal to worship him that he resolved to destroy the whole Jewish race, and in order to appoint a day for the execution of his purpose, he cast; i.e., he cast lots.

"In resorting to this method of ascertaining the most auspicious day for putting his atrocious scheme into execution, Haman acted as the kings and nobles of Persia have always done, never engaging in any enterprise without consulting the astrologers and being satisfied as to the lucky hour. Vowing revenge, but scorning to lay hands on a single victim, he meditated the extirpation of the whole Jewish race, who, he knew, were sworn enemies of his countrymen, and by artfully representing them as a people who were aliens in manners and customs and habits, and enemies to the rest of his subjects, procured the king's sanction of the intended massacre. One motive used in urging his point was addressed to the king's love of money. Fearing lest his master

should object that the extermination of a numerous body of his subjects would seriously depress the public revenue, Haman promised to make up the loss" (3:9).

Though, as we said in our introduction, there were no direct references to Jewish religion, the fact of Esther's and Mordecai's fasting implies prayer to GOD. Notice also that though the name of GOD is not mentioned, chapter 4:1 ff. clearly teaches faith in GOD's care and protection. Mordecai seems to have a full assurance that GOD will deliver His people and that in GOD's providence, Esther had come to the throne for the purpose of delivering her people.

Did natural circumstances seem to promise Esther a hearing from the king (4:11)?

What did Esther expect (4:16)?

How was GOD's influence manifested in her behalf (5:3)?

Did she immediately plead for her people's deliverance?

What was to happen before she did this (6:1, 10)?

What scripture does 7:10 illustrate (Proverbs 26:27; Psalm 9:15)?

III. The Feast of Purim

1. The king's decree allowing the Jews to protect themselves (Chapter 8).
2. The vengeance of the Jews (9:1-19).
3. The institution of the feast of Purim (9:20-32).
4. Mordecai's greatness (10:1-3).

Since the laws of the Medes and Persians were irrevocable (1:19; Daniel 6:8), the king's command to destroy the Jews could not be reversed. But in order to counteract this order, the king gave permission to the Jews to defend themselves. With the support of the king and government, and of a Jewish prime minister, victory was assured. But behind all these natural means, it was the unseen GOD who was protecting His own.

What were the feelings of the Jews on hearing of the king's decree (8:16, 17)?

What effect did it produce on the heathen (8:17)?

How many of their enemies did the Jews slay (9:16)?

How did the Jews celebrate their victory?

"They called these days Purim, after the name of Pur" (9:26). "Pur, in the Persian language, signifies lot; and the feast of Purim, or lots, has reference to the time having been pitched upon by Haman through the decision of the lot (3:7). In consequence of the signal national deliverance which divine providence gave them from the infamous machinations of Haman, Mordecai ordered the Jews to commemorate the event by an anniversary festival which was to last two days in accordance with the two days' war of defense they had to maintain.

There was a slight difference in the time of this festival; for the Jews in the provinces, having defended themselves against their enemies on the thirteenth, devoted the fourteenth to festivity; whereas their brethren in Shushan, having extended the work over two days, did not observe their thanksgiving feast till the fifteenth. But this was remedied as the authority which fixed the fourteenth and fifteenth of the month of Adar.

It became a season of sunny memories to the universal body of Jews; and by the letters of Mordecai, scattered through all parts of the Persian empire, it was established as an annual feast, the celebration of which is still kept up.

On both days of the feast, the modern Jews read the book of Esther in their synagogues. The copy must not be printed, but written on vellum in the form of a roll; and the names of the ten sons of Haman are written on it in a peculiar manner, being ranged, they say, like so many bodies on a gibbet. The reader must pronounce all the names in one breath. Whenever Haman's name is pronounced, they make a terrible noise in the synagogues. Some drum with their feet on the floor and the boys have mallets with which they knock and make a noise. They prepare themselves for their carnival by a previous fast, which should continue three days, in imitation of Esther's but they have mostly reduced it to one day.

Lessons from the Book of Esther.

1. Though sometimes the good may suffer and the evil prosper, GOD will eventually reverse the order. Haman, a cruel tyrant planned the destruction of Mordecai and his nation. In the end, Haman was degraded and Mordecai exalted.

2. GOD's care for His people may not always be an apparent fact, but nevertheless, it is being exercised. The name of GOD is not mentioned in this book, but evidences of His care and protection abound. One writer illustrates this truth by the figure of a stage manager, who, though hidden behind the scenes, plays an important part in the staging of a play.

"Careless seems the great Avenger;
History's pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness
'twixt old systems and the word;
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne
Yet that scaffold sways the future and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth GOD within the shadow, keeping watch
above His own."

- Lowell

3. GOD foresees and provides for every emergency; with Him, nothing happens by chance. GOD foresaw from the beginning the intended destruction of His people, and He provided for that emergency. A poor Jewish girl becomes queen and is thus able to save her people. GOD foresaw that Haman would attempt to destroy Mordecai; accordingly He so arranges events that a spell of sleeplessness on the part of the king leads to Mordecai's exaltation. GOD foresaw that since the decrees of the Medes and Persians were unchangeable, the Jews would have to fight for their lives; so He puts fear upon the people and gives the Jews favor in the sight of the governors.

4. GOD's providence takes in details. The accident of the king's sleeplessness, his fancy to have

the records read, the reader's stumbling accidentally on the account of Mordecai's act in saving the king's life, the king's happening to receive Esther when she came unbidden - all these seemingly accidental and insignificant events were used by GOD to deliver His people.

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